DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 433 273 SO 031 021

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TITLE Understanding "Whiteness" in Academia: A Black Woman's Perspective.
PUB DATE 1999-04-20
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 19-23, 1999).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavioral Science Research; *Blacks; *College Faculty; Higher Education; *Minority Group Teachers; Minority Groups; *Personal Narratives; *Racial Identification; *Women Faculty
IDENTIFIERS Academic Community; African Americans; Faculty Attitudes

ABSTRACT

While a great deal of discussion has been generated regarding increased levels of student diversity, recruitment of minority faculty, and the diversification of college curricula, there has been far less written about the impact of white institutions on the psyches of ethnic minority faculty. This paper discloses one African-American female faculty member's perceptions of "whiteness" in academia. The paper contends that if educators explore and examine the racial dynamics between faculty and staff, the complexities of addressing race and equity in the classroom is demystified and the likelihood of faculty-of-color remaining at predominantly white institutions is increased. It begins by describing the faculty member's reactions to a School of Education faculty race retreat. Drawing upon the faculty member's feelings, thoughts, and reactions to the retreat, the paper relates those reactions to the concept of "whiteness." Choosing to avoid the use of theory or theoretical perspectives, the paper relays the innermost feelings of the faculty member so that white colleagues might gain an understanding of the racial dynamics among faculty that frequently "color" institutions and cause minority faculty to leave or abandon academia. It is hoped that the illumination of this faculty member's perceptions will give senior faculty a better understanding of how to design racial awareness activities for faculty. (BT)

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Understanding "Whiteness" in academia: A Black woman's perspective

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association
Montreal, Canada
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Understanding "Whiteness" in Academia: A Black Woman's Perspective

Much of the discussion on minority faculty has centered on the recruitment and retention of ethnic minority faculty at predominately White universities and colleges. Although the number of entry-level faculty-of-color has increased on many campuses (de los Santos, 1994; Dinsmore & England, 1996; Moore, 1997), many scholars (e.g., Collins, 1990; Johnson, 1997) have argued that minority faculty are still more likely to leave an institution before a tenure decision is made and are less likely to successfully complete the tenure process. With that said, a consorted effort needs to be made to understand the perceptions and experiences of faculty-of-color at predominately White higher education institutions. Illuminating such information could provide valuable insight into the retention of minority faculty.

The purpose of this paper is to disclose my (i.e., African American female) perceptions of "Whiteness" in academia. Unfortunately the relationship between the racial identity of faculty-of-color and the ideology of "Whiteness" on college campuses has been lost in the multicultural education rhetoric. Whereas a great deal of discussion has been generated regarding increased levels of student diversity, recruitment of minority faculty, and the diversification of college curricula, there has been far less written about the impact of White institutions on the psyches of ethnic minority faculty. Needless to say, if this topic continues to be omitted from our discussions, our abilities to assist students' learnings will also be

greatly affected. In my opinion, if educators explore and examine the racial dynamics between faculty and staff, the complexities of addressing race and equity in the classroom is demystified and the likelihood of faculty-of-color remaining at predominately White institutions is increased.

Before beginning, I must admit that disclosing deep, personal feelings regarding my ethnicity and racial background is a scary process and arouses my sense of vulnerability. As a young, Black, female, untenured, faculty member, vulnerability is not an uncommon emotion. But once one discloses, the anger, resentment, fear, and unresolved emotions that are so common among people of color are unmasked. As I prepared this manuscript, I began to wonder, for example. "Will I be labeled as an angry, Black person? A radical? A troublemaker? But most importantly, what will my colleagues think? Will I "fit in" their intellectual community? Will I be penalized for writing such a manuscript? Will I cause too much discomfort among my colleagues? Despite these unanswered questions, the process of disclosing or unmasking has been therapeutic and liberating! I have no regrets for taking on this risk.

I will begin by describing my reactions to a School of Education faculty race retreat at Brooklyn College. Drawing upon my feelings, thoughts, and reactions to the retreat, I will then attempt to relate those reactions to the concept of "Whiteness." I have chosen to avoid the use of theory or theoretical perspectives. Instead, I want to relay my innermost feelings so that my White colleagues might gain an understanding of the racial dynamics among faculty that frequently

"color" our institutions and cause minority faculty to leave or abandon academia. Likewise, I hope that by illuminating my perceptions, senior faculty will have a better understanding of how to design racial awareness activities for faculty.

The Retreat

It is important to note that I came to Brooklyn College "fresh out" of a doctoral program and naive about the politics of academia and the challenges of being a "double minority" in a truly patriarchal and White urban institution. Therefore, my perceptions are through the "lens" of a young, inexperienced academician and cannot be generalized to all African American female faculty. At the time of the retreat, I was one of two African American full-time faculty members in the School of Education and one of only a handful of faculty-of-color at the College. Being the "only one," however was not a new experience for me since I had been the only person of color in my doctoral cohort group, the only person of color in many of my undergraduate college courses, and one in a small number of counselors-of-color in the school system where I worked after my undergraduate program.

Before the retreat, I had falsely assumed that the retreat would be fun. The innocuous material that the planning committee had included in the retreat's agenda perpetuated this fallacy of thought. I felt very comfortable as a member of the planning committee and discussing our objectives and outcomes of the retreat was quite stimulating. I actively participated in presenting my views and was vocal in my opinions regarding the selection of a consultant to

facilitate the retreat's activities. All of my contributions had been well received and I felt good about what I thought we were about to achieve.

As the day of the retreat approached, my bliss and excitement faded and was replaced with nervousness and anxiety. My discomfort started when I realized that I would be expected to share personal racial experiences in a small group with White colleagues. At first, I couldn't identify my uneasiness. It was only after the group discussions began that it dawned on me that "my story" was different. When everyone started to share narratives and/or racial experiences, I knew that my story would include revealing what it feels like to be the "other," whereas the other stories reflected "Whiteness" and privilege within our society and institution. Without warning, the anxiety, anger, and frustration that I had worked hard to "mask" began to surface. My body became tense and I could feel the rush of anxiety move throughout my body. I wanted to escape but there was no where to go. I would like to think that others in the group were also emotionally affected by the group's discussion. However, I was the only one who seemed to react emotionally. My palms became sweaty and my speech was jittery. It was difficult to maintain eye contact with the others at this point because I was fearful that they might see my discomfort and anger. My mask was peeling away and I felt that I had lost control! Meanwhile, the others seemed to be able to intellectually discuss the topic without much emotion. Their recollections of racial experiences were told in the same manner that one would discuss a theory of child development or biology. There was

very little emotional information shared or disclosed by the White group members. Perhaps this is what most White persons have never fully comprehended about "race," that racism is not just a theory or construct. Racism, at its essential core, is most keenly felt by ethnic minorities in the smallest manifestations: the White teacher who uses code language to refer to minority students; the White senior faculty member who ignores a White professor's racial comments in a faculty meeting. Each small incident, like the intellectualizing of race in my retreat group, is interpreted as "racial" and reflects the power and privilege which I can never forget.

One White colleague shared her desire to be perceived as a "good White." It seemed to me that she was not only struggling with guilt as a result of her inherent privileges but also some fear of losing her privileges. When our group began to critically challenge "Whiteness" within our university, I felt as if I was placed in an awkward position of educating others or as hooks (1994) claims, I became the "native informant." For instance, in the midst of our discussion regarding the diversity of the Black community surrounding the university, one group member pointedly asked me to inform her about the tension between different Black ethnic groups in the school's community. Another White colleague wanted to know how I behaved differently at work and at home. Somehow, the power was shifted to the Whites in the group and I, the only person of color, felt powerless. By shifted I mean that they (the other group members) had the power to ask me to inform them. I, on the other hand, didn't perceive myself as having the power to challenge their "Whiteness."

When I think back, I wish that I had asked, "Do you have to consider the difference between your behavior at work and at home?" "Tell me about the tension between the Italians and Jews in our university community?" Maybe if I had another person-of-color who could have validated my feelings and thoughts, I would have been more apt to challenge my colleagues. Nevertheless, feelings of alienation, fear, and "otherness" overwhelmed me at this point and I shut down. I had opened myself up to the group, answered their questions, and then there was no reciprocation. I waited for the moment when several group members would share their experiences with "others" or to discuss the benefits of White privilege and power within our institution. Instead, they avoided any discussion pertaining to their experiences with people of color except to share some anecdotes about successful minority students. Other than those somewhat meaningless stories, the focus was on me. I interpreted this as saying that racism was my problem—not there's.

I regret that I did not express my hurt or disappointment during our group discussion. Instead, I left the retreat feeling exposed and depressed.

Discussion

The retreat was neither an uncommon event in my life nor a critical life event that would change the course of my life. But instead, it was a reflection of how my "otherness" and other's "Whiteness" manifests in higher education settings and affects the relationships between faculty. Despite my awareness of the group's goals (i.e., to understand how race has impacted our lives), I felt

distrustful and angry with my colleagues following the retreat. I wanted to reject and devalue their stories while at the same time I wanted to immediately validate my feelings with other Black persons. Somehow I felt that if I withdrew from the setting which symbolized "Whiteness," the anger and pain would stop. For a brief moment, I even questioned my participation in such activities. "Why do I bother to discuss race with Whites?" "Why am I involved with this institution?" "Will I ever be understood?" "Does any of this race stuff matter?"

It is clear that those who benefit directly from higher education institutions have historically been defined as "White," middle to upper class and male. And it is precisely here within this structure of power and privilege that my racial identity in the context of academia is located. To be the "typical" tenured professor is by definition not to be an Asian American, Latino, African American, or a woman. Or viewed another way, the hegemonic ideology of "Whiteness" is absolutely central in rationalizing and justifying the gross inequalities of race, gender, and class, experienced by many Americans who perceive themselves as "others." "Whiteness" becomes the very "center" of the dominant criteria for acceptance and intellectual leadership and as a result, very few discuss "Whiteness" when critiquing race. Race is about unequal relationships characterized by dominant and subordinate forms of social interactions and reinforced by the intricate patterns of public discourse, power, and privilege within our institutions. Race became a "real" force in my retreat group when our behaviors began to reflect or perpetuate the ideology

of subordination and the patterns of inequality in my daily life. Ironically, because of these behaviors, my perceived racial identity status somehow shifted or changed to a status in which I wanted to withdraw from my interactions with my White peers and focus instead on rejecting every symbol of "Whiteness."

Given the roles that "Whiteness" plays in the racial identity of faculty-of-color, it is imperative that we (teachers) consider how "Whiteness" plays a defining role in our teaching practices. While the retreat acknowledged the value of race discourse, it highlighted the complexity of confronting racism and "Whiteness" in a racially heterogeneous group. Faculty-of-color are often lost in the race rhetoric because of our tendency to shift into the "native informant" role which in turn can cause resentment, anger and more divisiveness. White faculty, on the other hand, might also shift into their "privileged" positions as the inquirer or the "this is not my problem" role. In essence, it is the teacher's challenge to enhance the racial identities of themselves and students without alienating other groups. That is, we all hold some responsibility in the process of challenging "Whiteness." When we planned the faculty retreat, I was against the idea of separating the discussion groups along racial/ethnic lines. However, after reflecting on my reactions, I can see its value. Perhaps I would have benefited from an initial dialogue with persons of color who had similar racial issues. I can only imagine the sense of validation and strength that I might have gained from such a group. Perhaps then I would have been able to move

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into a heterogeneous group and feel empowered enough to challenge my colleagues without the fear of being penalized.

Although the retreat was emotional for me, it was only the beginning of the "unmasking" process. Writing this paper was a second step. It has caused me to replay the retreat over and over again in my head and to critique faculty dynamics, especially between faculty-of-color and White faculty. By processing the retreat experience with other colleagues, I have examined more closely the anger and fear within me. I constantly evaluate and reevaluate my career as a Black academic. Each day, I ask myself, "Did I feel devalued today?" "Did I feel appreciated for my uniqueness?" Although my goal is not to be dependent on my White colleagues for validation, academia is a symbol of "Whiteness" and to this end, my future in academia is unfortunately based upon how well I fit into the White higher education environment. As I mentioned previously, the increase of faculty-of-color at predominately White institutions will surely assist in empowering faculty-of-color, but not until White faculty understand the experiences and concerns of minority faculty will the complexities of privilege, power, and equity be truly understood and rectified.

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